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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT Thursday, December 28, 1939.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "CARE OF CHRISTMAS PLANTS." Information for the Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

If your Christmas was brightened by a colorful poinsettia plant this year, or maybe a Jerusalem cherry in full fruit, or some of the handsome foliage house plants, you can enjoy them far beyond the holiday season by giving them good care. I've some information here from the Bureau of Plant Industry on the care of some of these Christmas plants.

Remember that these plants have all been rather suddenly subjected to a very severe change. Up to a few days before they entered your home, they lived in the moisture-laden atmosphere of a greenhouse, at a temperature exactly suited to their particular species. When they left the greenhouse for the florist's store, they were protected on the way and the florist and his staff usually watched the moisture content of the store atmosphere very carefully.

But alas,- when the plants arrived at your house they might as well have been set down in a desert, unless your home is quite different from the average. Even when we keep water pans on radiators, or have a liberal reservoir under the hot air furnace or an evaporating pan for the stove, the air inside the house is comparatively dry. In greenhouses this dryness is overcome partly by the moisture given off by housing many plants together in a small space; partly by keeping damp or moss wet sand under and about the pots, and partly by wetting the walks and area under the plant stands constantly.

Well, we can't make our houses moist in just that way. But we can keep the radiator pans filled and have more of them. We can boil a tea-kettle of water in or

near the room where the plants are, once a day, and let the steam escape. We can put felt pads in saucers under the flower pots, and keep them moist. This is much better than allowing water to stand in the saucers. Peat moss or absorbent cotton makes good pads.

We may be able to devote a room that is a little cooler than the rest of the house to the plants that need moisture, cool air, and lots of sunshine. We can give the plants that need it plenty of water to drink, and some of them will enjoy a gentle spray bath of clear water once in a while. Use a laundry sprinkling bulb for this, or for sturdy plants, a shampoo spray, placing the plant in the bath-tub on its side.

No one would deliberately "gas" a nice new Christmas plant, but a leak of illuminating gas so small you cannot smell it may hurt your plants. Coal gas escaping from a furnace, a range or heating stove, or the gases from an oil heater or cookstove, may be as bad for plants as these fumes are for human beings.

So much for plants in general. Now for the special care of some of the individual Christmas plants. First on the list- the poinsettia. (And so say poinsett-ee-a.) The bright red leaves are not true blossoms, you know. They just frame the inconspicuous cluster of flowers at the ends of the stems. They will probably drop off by the end of the holidays. But the plant will flower again next winter, if you give it a four-months' rest, until the first of May. Put it in a cool place, where the temperature is between 40 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit, where it cannot freeze. The soil will dry out, but do not water it during this resting period.

About the first of May, cut the poinsettia back if there is too much old wood present to make a shapely plant. Then shake or better wash the old soil from the roots and repot in a pot just large enough to hold the roots without crowding. For the soil use 3 parts garden loam, 1 part well-rotted cow manure, and 1 part leaf mold. See that the new pot drains well by placing a few small stones or broken pot over the drainage hole in the bottom.

Now the poinsettia is ready to start life afresh in a light, warm place. It will need watering whenever the soil looks dry. As soon as the maple trees are in full leaf and the nights are no longer cold it can be set out of doors. Dig a hole as deep as the pot, and put the plant in it, pot and all. When growth starts, give the plant stakes to support the stems or head back the stems to make the plant compact. When there is the least danger of frost in the fall it is time for the plant to come indoors again. Try to keep the room temperature between 60 and 65 degrees, and introduce what moisture you can into the atmosphere. Give a little liquid manure about once a week. Then you should have blooms for Christmas.

The Jerusalem cherry is another popular plant for expressing Christmas spirit. This plant will thrive and keep its bright red fruits in a reasonably high temperature. It must also have sunshine and moderate watering. Set it in the ground in the spring. The second year it will not fruit as abundantly as before.

Gardenias and little citrus trees are often given as Christmas plants. The gardenias require more moisture than is possible in most houses, full sunlight, and a well-drained acid soil. They can stand a room temperature of about 80 degrees in the daytime, and 65 degrees at night.

Small orange or lemon or grapefruit trees may bloom in the house, and occasionally bear fruit. They need to be moderately pot-bound to induce flower buds, and to be fed rather liberally with liquid manure or other plant food. They do not need a great deal of water but must not become too dry.

Some other plants appearing in the holiday season for gifts are palms, cacti, aspidistra, and sansevieria or bowstring hemp. The last two, sansevieria and aspidistra, stand the adverse conditions of houses very well.

If you find mealy bugs, red spiders or aphids on any of your plants, try spraying them with a solution made of 1 teaspoonful of nicotine sulphate in a gallon of water in which a 1 inch cube of laundry soap is dissolved. Some of the mealy-bugs will have to be picked off the plants by hand, with a splint or toothpick. My time is up, may you have good luck with your Christmas plants!